

Post 9/11 Afghan Women: A Comparative Study Of Khaled Hosseini And Atique Rahimi's Writings

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Abstract:

Afghanistan is a country that has been facing war for about 40 years. Women and children have always been the victims of this war and its spoils. In their narratives, both the novelists Khaled Hosseini and Atique Rahimi present a subjective vision of post 9/11 Afghan women and thereby attempt to awaken the world to the plight of deprived women in Afghanistan. In this qualitative research, Catherine Belsey's theory of Expressive realism has been applied on Khaled Hosseini and Atique Rahimi's works to find out the answer of the question: What was the condition of Afghan women in Pre- Taliban and Post-Taliban eras as portrayed in the selected novels of the selected writers Khaled Hosseini and Atique Rahimi ?The aim of the research is to explore whether women are oppressed in Afghan society or not, and whether the incident of 9/11 and US bombing of Afghanistan improved the miserable predicament of Afghan women or not. The research would be helpful to locate the social position of women in Afghan society under the rule of Taliban and then finally in post 9/11 Afghanistan.

Keywords: Oppression, Post 9/11, Women, Pre Taliban, Post-Taliban, Culture, Religion, International Politics

Introduction: 21st century is the world of post-post modernism and an era of war which is popularly known as an era of terrorism. Afghanistan is considered the origin of these terrorist activities. It is a territory that has undergone a period of crisis for forty years: first the Soviet occupation and jihad, then the arrival of Taliban, and finally the incident of 9/11 and imminent defeat of Taliban. Women of this country have suffered excessively through all this time and became the victim of extreme consequences of this situation. Khaled Hosseini and Atique Rahimi are two fiction writers of the 21st century: both are Afghan by birth but one moved to America and the other to France. Both of these writers have brought the condition of women in Afghanistan to surface in pre as well as post-Taliban era peeping through socio-religious values of that country.

Main Text:

Expressive realism is the personal and subjective approach to analyze any text. An expressive realist depicts reality but also gives his personal feelings and views. This is not objective but subjective reality. Catherine Belsey writes about expressive realism in her book *Critical Practices* that an author leaves some gaps in his sentences which a reader interprets according to his own perception of reality. So, the meaning varies from reader to reader. She talks about the plurality of meanings. This approach will be used to take a kaleidoscopic view of the texts under consideration.

Afghanistan has been the historical victim of international politics. In the 1800s, British Empire invaded Afghanistan; in 1978 Soviet Union invaded this country. In retaliation for foreign occupation, the people of Afghanistan started reacting with their weapons. This civil war was a result of foreign policies and politics. When America came to know that Russia is invading Afghanistan, she fought with Russia keeping itself behind the curtain. The so-called *mujahideen* were the US backed. They were being supplied guns, weapons and machines by America. Then the era of warlords started who made rape an integral part of the war. Taliban came in 1996 and ruled this country. In 2001, taking attacks on twin towers as a pretext America attacked Afghanistan and destroyed everything to defeat Taliban.

Afghan men are tribal people. Fighting is their passion. They like to wear weapons to show their masculinity. Fighting is a matter of prestige for them. Afghanistan has faced four decades of war leaving behind its long-lasting effects. These wars have destroyed the whole infra-structure of the country. War brings the darkest kind of fear in peoples' lives. Rahimi in his novel *The Patience Stone* has presented

these issues regarding war. The time which is portrayed in '*The Patience Stone*' is in civil war after the Taliban's defeat after 9/11 when America took control of the country. Although the novel has been written after 9/11 yet it has the enduring effects of previous extended war on it.

If a man is in jihad, every one of his family is proud of him, but it is only his wife who lives through this loneliness. Here, in *The Patience Stone*, the writer is playing with and within the mind of the woman. Rahimi has probed the impact of war on women which has resulted in their physical dissatisfaction. The nameless heroine of *The Patience Stone* says "We've been married for more than ten years, but lived together for only two or three." (Rahimi, 2010, p.58). Hosseini depicts sexual dissatisfaction in the character of Marriam in his novel *Thousand Splendid Suns*. Because of war between *mujahideen* or warlords, many women were left alone as their families had died in bombings. The character of Laila is the portrayal of such a girl. Rasheed takes advantage of it and marries her at the age of nearly 60 while Laila is only 14 years. He has again started his conjugal life but life for Marriam has ended. She feels an emptiness in herself. Both the writers have discussed this phenomenon of dissatisfaction of women and thereby given voice to the suppressed desires of women.

In 1978 when communists came, they made liberal policies for women. They tried to improve their condition. Communists increased the education and working facilities for women. "Women have always had it hard in this country, Laila, but they are freer now, under the communists, and have more rights than they've ever had before." (Hosseini, 2007, p. 144) Khaled Hosseini writes that Kabul has been a well-developed and liberal city of Afghanistan where women taught at universities, ran schools and were very much advanced. The communists provided the opportunity to women to be professionally successful in tribal areas. The government of Soviet Union was women friendly and worked for those tribal women who were living near to borders and rarely seen in streets wearing *burqa*, accompanied with men. But in Rahimi's another novel *Earth and Ashes*, a victim Dastaguir describes how, when the Soviet army arrived in Afghanistan, he saw his house reduced to rubble, his wife going mad and then killed due to the destruction, how women were buried alive, how his daughter-in-law was dishonoured and how she, while he sees her naked, disappears into the fire, and how his house had become a grave—a "grave for my wife, a grave for my son, his wife and their children." (Rahimi, 2002, p.31)

After signing the treaty in 1989 Russians left Kabul. *Mujahiden* became the warlords. These *mujahideen* were the heroes of Afghanistan. People prayed for their success. But when they came to power, they began to fight with one another for small pieces of land. Bringing in the discussion that era of Afghan history; as an instance Hosseini writes in his novel that three dead sisters were found in a house at that time with raped, humiliated and mutilated bodies. After coming into power, Taliban implemented a new of rules; they argued that their rules were according to *Sharia*. Khaled Hosseini, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, writes about the rules which Taliban devised for women. They were told that they were strictly supposed to remain inside their houses, if caught alone, will be beaten severely. If they were seen with nail paint on their nails, they would lose their fingers. Girls were forbidden to go to schools. Women were forbidden from working. They were to follow these rules at any cost. Hosseini, not only reflects the scenario of implementation of these rules but also the punishments given to women. There are certain events and characters in the novel that articulate the women's actual social position in the Afghan society. The most controversial among the policies of Taliban is the punishment of disobedience of women that is beating. According to Robinson Barnett, In Taliban era, the health status of the population was already at risk and the Taliban's new restrictions caused more damage to this health status. The women were banned from the public bath houses: the only places where women could wash in hot water, this resulted in a noticeable increase in scabies and infections. "The greatest risk is of uterine infection after childbirth, a major cause of maternal mortality. Young children who formerly accompanied their mothers to the bath-houses are also now at greater risk of respiratory disease." (Barnett, 1997, p. 295)

There were no medical facilities in Afghanistan during Taliban rule. When Laila gave birth to her son Zalmai she was taken to a hospital but Taliban stopped them saying they should have gone to a women's hospital. "This hospital no longer treats women." (Hosseini, 2007, p. 305) The hospital for women was *Rabia Bhalkhi* where "They had no clean water, she said, no oxygen, no medication, no electricity."

(Hosseini, 2007, p. 306) Taliban had also imposed various restrictions on doctors and nurses. A doctor said, "They want us to operate in *burqa*" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 311)

Because of poverty, Laila's daughter was taken to the orphanage. According to Taliban's rules, a woman could not walk alone in the streets. Once, when she was going alone to meet her daughter, a young Taliban stopped her and beat her as a punishment. Men like Rasheed were happy with Taliban rule, he says about them, "Meet our real masters." (Hosseini, 2007, p.329) In 2001, Twin Towers of New York were allegedly hit by Al-Qaida. Osama Bin Laden was blamed for these attacks. According to America, Taliban were involved in this attack as they supported Laden. Hosseini writes that Osama bin Laden was a "mehman" of Taliban so they announced that they will not give up on him. According to a pro-US circle, this attitude of Taliban forced America to bomb Afghanistan to kill Osama. Finally, after 9/11 America took control over Afghanistan. To justify US attack on Afghanistan Lady Laura Bush assumed another stance in her weekly presidential address on the radio that "The brutal oppression of women is the central goal of terrorists." (Khatak, 2006, p. 18) Saba Gul Khatak said that nothing could justify the bombing of Afghanistan, least of all the so called liberation of Afghan women. The removal of Taliban did not achieve this liberation of women. Warren in her criticism on Trump's policies writes, "But the concern for women's rights is usually short-lived, often only used as a tactic to initiate military action and not an end goal." (Warren, 2017) In her trailblazing article "Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Spivak writes, "White men saving brown women from brown men". (Spivak, 1985, p. 93). It stands true for the women of Afghanistan. In the article, "Saving Brown Women" written in connection to Spivak's above mentioned statement, Miriam Cooke wrote, "Politics in the era of U.S. Empire disappears behind the veil of women's victimization." (Cooke, 2002, p. 469) Miriam argued that since 1996 America had heard about the mistreatment with Afghan women. Everyone knew that those women were being ruled over by the strict fundamentalists, the Taliban. But in the wake of 2001 this issue attracted the media the most. In September 11, 2001, Taliban were blamed for supporting the attacks on twin towers. Because of this accusation the Taliban's strict and harsh attitude towards women became prominent. In fact women oppression took more attention. Afghan women and three thousand people who died in 9/11 were the victims of Al-Qaida terrorists. Within the time period of two months US bombed Afghanistan to save the women from Taliban. The political motives hide behind the screen of screen of humanism.

Atique Rahimi's novel *The Patience Stone* depicts the time of post 9/11. In the end of his novel the woman, the main protagonist, has been murdered by his husband for the crime of adultery. In the novel, there are lines "Yes, my Sang-e- Saboor, those two girls are not yours!" She sits up. "And do you know why? Because you were the infertile one. Not me!" (Rahimi, 2010, p. 137) Adultery is indeed a heinous crime but the social pressure endured by the heroine was of such a higher scale that she was pushed to the corner of this lawbreaking and forgot the distinction between right and wrong. *The Patience Stone* is an illustration of the observation that foreign control brought no change in the terrible lives of women in Afghanistan. They were as insecure and oppressed in post 9/11 Afghan society as they were in pre 9/11 Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, Hosseini, in *Thousand Splendid Suns*, brings the development in Afghanistan and liberation of women in post 9/11 scenario to the surface. According to him, the infrastructure of Afghanistan had been rebuilt by Americans. Women were able to move around alone. "Are you sure you don't want me to come along?" (Hosseini, 2007, p.420) This argument between Tariq and Laila reflects a friendly atmosphere for the women of Afghanistan. The Conversation between Laila and driver is also an indication of women liberation, as there was a time when women received beatings for talking to a stranger. Women had also been allowed to wear jewellery and other ornaments. The TV was approachable. Families had started having their dinners at the restaurants. Music could be heard from the streets of Kabul. The overall situation in Afghanistan was under control. Crack down on women seemed to have vanished according to Khaled Hosseini.

Amad is saying that Hosseini's novel has the ability to capture the reader's attention and draw a connection between the readers and characters but at the same time Hosseini has been failed to fairly depict the pre-Taliban and post-Taliban situation in his novel. He also presents only the wrong side of

Muslims for the western audiences. He doesn't present other side of the coin. As in Amad's words, "Many Rasheeds and Jalil's existed and still exist in Afghanistan but there are an equivalent number of Joes and Mikes in the western societies who beat up their wives and have mistresses". (Amad, 2007)

Zama Coursen-Neff has traveled to Afghanistan in 2002 to 2003, when Taliban had been thrown out and NATO forces took control of Afghanistan. She discussed in her article "Afghan Women and Girls Still Held Hostage" the educational and job opportunities for women after the Taliban era and also under the NATO rule. She stated that,

Despite high hopes when the Taliban were driven from power, severe discrimination and sexual violence continue to plague the lives of women and girls throughout Afghanistan. Physical insecurity and de facto restrictions on freedom of movement still prevent many women and girls from going to school or to work, and from participating in the country's civic life. (Coursen, 2003, p. 08)

Leela Jacinto's article "Abandoning the Wardrobe and Reclaiming Religion in the Discourse on Afghan Women's Islamic Rights" deals with the role of religion in shaping the rights of Afghan women post 9/11. Afghanistan is an Islamic republic. Article No. 3 of the new constitution of Afghanistan which was adopted in January 2004 states "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." (Jacinto, 2006, p. 11) Leela argued that constitution did not clearly define these beliefs and provisions. On the equality of genders, article 22 states:

Citizens of Afghanistan whether men or women have equal rights before law While this new constitution was defending the equality between men and women, Afghan women's rights activists have voiced some serious concerns over the constitution's vagueness and lack of explicit protection and promotion for women's rights. (Jacinto, 2006, p. 12)

Women in Afghanistan continue to suffer oppression and abuse even after the thirteen years of the fall of the Taliban. According to a report of "The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission", it documented 2,621 cases of domestic violence, in the first eight months of 2016. Sima Joyenda, the female governor of the western Ghor province in Afghanistan, in December 2015, was asked to step down from her post as she received a number of death intimidations. (Anon., human rights watch, 2017) A research by Global Rights evaluates that almost 90 percent of Afghan women face psychological, physical or sexual violence, or are made to accept forced marriages. War-torn and trauma-stricken Afghanistan is graded as one of the most unsafe places to be born a woman in the world, according to an analysis conducted by the Thompson Reuters Foundation. Sima Samar, the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said: "It's a question of power and religion, you use religion, you use culture, you use tradition, you use gender to keep the power, to keep control." (Karishma, 2015)

In an article in New York Times "*Their Identities Denied, Afghan Women Ask, 'Where Is My Name?'*" it is pointed out that women face in Afghanistan even in the second decade of the 21st century, that is their men do not like to use the names of the women who belong to them. The name them as "My Household", "Mother of Children", "My Weak One" or in far corners, "My Chicken and My Goat." A social media campaign to change this custom has been percolating in recent weeks, initiated by young women. A social media campaign has been launched in local languages with a hashtag that reports the basic issue and turns #WhereIsMyName. Rizayee said. "The body of a woman belongs to a man, and other people should not even use her body indirectly, such as looking at her. Based on this logic, the body, face and name of the woman belong to the man...This is a traditional and cultural issue; it needs a long-term cultural struggle and fight," he said. "By weakening tribal cultures, and awareness through the media, this type of thinking about woman could be changed." (nd) Ms Sohaili, the activist, said she hoped men would look inward and consider why it was taboo to write a woman's name, even in a doctor's prescription. "Is it cultural, is it religious?" she asked. "Are there any logical roots to this at all?" (Mashal, 2017)

Conclusion:

An in-depth study of the scrape of Afghan women portrayed by Afghan writers and the critical observations of some of the analysts who got the impression of the whole scenario in Afghanistan from a distance, it can be concluded that although some intellectuals take Americans as incarnations of saviors for Afghan people generally and Afghan women particularly, yet the ground facts obliterate this understanding with examples from the real life. Women in Afghanistan are still suppressed, still objectified and still carrying on the ontological struggle. No matter who is the master: Soviet army, Mujahideen, Taliban or NATO forces, the Afghan woman has always experienced the same fate of being treated as a non-human entity. A ray of hope could be seen at the end of the tunnel only in case of a slow but durable change in the deep-rooted culture of Afghanistan.

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